

SOME NOTES ON LOVEBIRDS, (Agapornis spp.)

By

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The following observations on the behaviour and breeding of Lovebirds (Agapornis spp.) may be of interest:

The family Psittacidae includes two species of lovebirds resident in Tanganyika - these are Agapornis fischeri Reichenow and A. personata Reichenow. The Yellow-collared Lovebird, A. personata, is distinguished by its black head, yellow neck and green rump; Fischer's Lovebird by its peach-coloured head and violet rump. Both species have dark green wings and backs, with a lighter green belly, tomato-red beak, white-rimmed eyes and grey feet. The sexes are indistinguishable. The two species have very similar habits.

Both species occur naturally in central Tanganyika and have also been introduced to the coast at Tanga and Dar es Salaam. The type of country they inhabit is typical Nyika - rather dry acacia country, sparsely wooded and dotted with baobab trees.

About eight years ago I obtained five specimens of A. personata, housing them in an outdoor aviary measuring about ten feet long, five feet broad and seven feet high. Three years later we obtained three specimens of A. fischeri. Although Nairobi is about two thousand feet higher than their native habitat, with corresponding differences in climate and vegetation, both species seem to thrive here, two years ago their numbers reached a peak of sixty, all descended from the original eight birds.

The birds are provided with nesting boxes, sunflower seed and water; otherwise they are left to fend for themselves. Eighteen months ago I made some holes in the aviary so that the birds are now able to enter and leave at will. No particular effort has been made to tame the birds. Over the eight years or so I have noticed the following features:-

1. Both species appear to eat only plant foods, and their main food consists of seeds, such as sunflower, millet and grass seeds. Both species have a habit of chewing blades of grass, as if to extract the juices. I have never seen the birds eating fruit.
2. Both species have a similar variety of calls, consisting of squawks and squeaking twitters, although I have not been able to discover the significance of the variations. Occasionally several birds will squawk intermittently, almost in turn as it were, continuing this performance for ten or twenty seconds, until one or more of the birds will suddenly burst out with a torrent of high-pitched twittering. Once again, I cannot see any reason for this peculiar habit. Generally A. fischeri is the more vociferous of the two species.
3. Both species make a rough nest of twigs inside the nesting boxes provided. Often a large mound of nesting material is placed next to the entrance, presumably to act as a wind-break. Mackworth-Praed and Grant mention that both species often block the entrance to the nest

with the thorns, but I have never seen this. However this may be due to the scarcity of acacia trees in the neighbourhood.

4. Both species appear to breed throughout the year, and do not follow any particular breeding season. In contrast Praed and Grant state that A. fischeri breeds between May and July; A. personata between March and August. A. fischeri appears to be the more prolific of the two species by breeding more often. Praed and Grant state that between five and seven young are produced in each brood, but three is the largest brood I have observed. According to Praed and Grant again, the young of A. fischeri have indistinct narrow barring, but I have never noticed this on any of my specimens.

The parent birds usually feed partially digested food to their young, and before disgorging the food, go through a series of hiccupping or vomiting motions. These appear to act as a stimulus to the young bird, for it immediately opens its beak and spreads its wings to ward off its brothers and sisters. Once, when trying to feed an abandoned young bird and meeting with little success, I tried going through the same motions of vomiting, this produced instant results for the young bird opened its beak and I was able to feed it. This method has worked with all the abandoned young I have since fed.

5. Perhaps the most interesting feature was the successful rearing of hybrid young, which has gone on for four years. These hybrids now account for about one third of the number of birds in the aviary. In appearance they are approximately midway between A. fischeri and A. personata, having a purple rump and yellowish neck; the head is a brown colour which shades to orange on the forehead. About a year ago I began to wonder if these hybrids were breeding, as I had seen them mating and also noticed that the colour of brown on the head varied considerably; on some birds it was almost black whilst other birds differed little from A. fischeri. This led me to suspect that some of the hybrids had successfully mated with specimens of one of their parents. In February of this year I obtained proof that this was so when I examined a nest at night and found it contained two parents, one a hybrid and one a specimen of A. fischeri, together with three young birds. The three young birds are now in mature plumage.

These observations have, of course, been made under somewhat artificial conditions, and this must be borne in mind when assessing their value. However one fact seems to stand out - the ability of the two species to interbreed. If one accepts that a separate species is a group of organisms which are capable of interbreeding with one another to produce fertile young, then it may be that A. fischeri and A. personata are not separate species but merely races or sub-species of one species. In any event, these two lovebirds are well worth further study.

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